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AUTHOR	Lorenzen, Michael
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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted in January 1997 to determine security issues of Ohio public libraries. The survey was distributed to 100 libraries of differing sizes with a 70% completion rate. The following questions were asked: (1) Do you believe that security is a problem at your library? (2) Do you believe that mutilation of periodicals is a problem at your library? (3) Do you believe that theft of library materials is a problem at your library? (4) Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled from the library for periodical mutilation? (5) Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled for theft of library materials? (6) Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled for threatening or harassing library staff or patrons? (7) Does your library have an electronic security system? and (8) Does your library have a written security policy? Results indicated that security is a problem. Harassment of library staff and patrons was the biggest concern. Electronic security systems were widespread and effective in deterring and catching thieves. (Contains 10 references.) (MES)

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"Security Issues of Ohio Public Libraries."

by

Michael Lorenzen, Library Instruction Coordinator
Michigan State University

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INTRODUCTION:

Educational institutions are not always safe and secure places. Violence and property crimes can and do occur. Public libraries are no exception and they are subject to a wide variety of security concerns. These include the theft and mutilation of library material as well as the harassment of library staff and patrons by disturbed individuals. Libraries have responded in many ways to these issues including installing security systems and writing library security policies.

A survey was conducted in January 1997 to determine the security issues of Ohio public libraries. The survey examined library perceptions of security as well as determining if certain security problems had occurred in the last 12 months. The survey also asked if each library had an electronic security system or written security policy. The survey was randomly distributed to 100 libraries of differing sizes around the state. Of these, 70 were returned resulting in a 70% completion rate. The survey was also addressed to the Head of Circulation at each library as the person in this position normally deals with security problems when they occur.

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY:

Question number one asked, "Do you believe that security is a problem at your library?" This question was asked to see what the perceptions of security problems were in Ohio public libraries. While individual definitions of whether a library is having problems with security will differ from person to person, overall those individuals working in libraries with significant

security problems will probably know it. The results showed that a majority of libraries (63%) did have problems with security. The other libraries (37%) did not consider security to be a problem.

The second question asked, "Do you believe that the mutilation of periodicals is a problem at your library?" Past research has shown that periodical mutilation is widespread and can be damaging to a libraries' collection.[1] While one study has shown that academic libraries are more vulnerable to periodical mutilation than are public libraries, looking at an academic study on periodical mutilation can show how widespread the problem can be.[2] A study of academic libraries in Ohio showed that 62.5% of university libraries in Ohio believed that periodical mutilation was a problem.[3] Individuals working in public libraries in Ohio identified periodical mutilation as a problem in nearly the same number. A considerable number of libraries (60%) did consider this a problem showing that periodical mutilation is a big problem in Ohio for both public and academic libraries.

Question number three asked, "Do you believe that the theft of library materials is a problem at your library?" One recent study showed that 12% of the library books in Ohio were missing while only 3% had become unusable due to deterioration.[4] This demonstrated that book theft was a bigger issue for libraries than book preservation. Library employees can also steal from the library.[5] Individuals working in public libraries in Ohio tended to agree that book theft was a problem. The majority

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(69%) believed that book theft was a problem while a fewer number of libraries (31%) did not.

LIBRARY SECURITY INCIDENTS:

The next three questions in the survey asked about actual library security statistics. Question four asked, "Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled from the library for periodical mutilation?" Question five asked, "Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled from the library for the theft of library materials?" Libraries reported similar responses for both. The majority (86%) had not arrested or expelled anyone from the library for periodical mutilation. The same number (86%) had not arrested or expelled anyone from the library for the theft of library materials.

However, question six revealed a more widespread problem. Question six asked, "Was there an instance in the last 12 months where a patron or staff member was arrested or expelled from the library for threatening or harassing library staff or patrons?" Harassment of library staff and patrons had occurred at the majority (71%) of libraries. This makes threats and harassment of individuals the biggest security problem in the public libraries of Ohio.

ELECTRONIC SECURITY SYSTEMS:

The most widespread response to theft and periodical mutilation across the nation has been the instillation of electronic security systems. One past study showed that theft and periodical mutilation decrease significantly after the

instillation of an electronic security system.[6] Further, another study showed that those libraries that use electronic security systems to stop and punish thieves are highly effective at protecting their collections.[7]

Question seven asked, "Does your library have an electronic security system?" The result was surprising in that only 54% of public libraries in Ohio had electronic security systems. As evidence indicates that electronic security systems are common and work nationwide in libraries, the fact that 46% of public libraries did not have electronic security systems was not expected.

SECURITY POLICIES:

Written security policies are important because they help staff identify and deal with security problems. One past study found that library staff are not educated as to what a security problems are and how to deal with them.[8] Another study found that library staff do not enforce library rules.[9] This appeared to be due to the fact that the staff did not know what the rules were.

Question eight asked, "Does your library have a written security policy that defines what a security problem is and how to deal with it?" A majority of libraries did not have a written security policy (71%) and a small number did (29%). The positive response to this question is only a little higher than in the academic libraries of Ohio in which the majority of libraries did not have a written security policy.[10]

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

There is a sense around the public libraries of Ohio that security is a problem. Well over half of the responding libraries in the survey believe that their library has a problem with security and material theft. Almost the same number believe that the mutilation of periodicals is a problem in their library. This perception of security problems is only partially validated by other questions in the survey. Only a small number of the libraries had arrested or expelled a patron or staff member in the twelve months preceding the survey for material theft or periodical mutilation. However, 71% of the libraries had arrested or expelled a patron or staff member in the twelve months preceding the survey for threatening or harassing library staff or patrons.

The harassment of library staff and patrons is the biggest security problem currently facing public libraries in Ohio. However, libraries are not well prepared to face this issue. Deciding when an individual has crossed the line and is being disruptive enough to warn, expel, or have arrested is a difficult decision in some instances. A well written security policy defines what this problem is and how to deal with it. Yet, only 29% of libraries have such a document. If library staff do not know how to define or deal with a security problems due to a lack of a written policy and training, how are library staff going to deal effectively with threatening and harassing patrons?

Electronic security systems are widespread and effective in deterring and catching thieves. However, only a little more than

half (54%) of the public libraries in Ohio actually have these systems. While many of the responding libraries may be small and have little need for an electronic security system, most libraries which do not currently have an electronic security system would benefit from installing one.

Library security is a complex but important issue. The safety of library staff, patrons, and the library collection are all at stake. The public libraries of Ohio have some security problems and many libraries have responded by writing security policies and installing electronic security systems. Unfortunately, security problems will probably not disappear in the future and libraries will need to continue to be aware of what is occurring in the library and new ideas in dealing with different security problems.

ENDNOTES:

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9. Mast, S. 1983. Ripping off and ripping out: Book theft and mutilation from academic libraries. *Library & Archival Security* 5(4):31-51.

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